

Veronika Shakhova, (Blagoveschensk, Bashkortostan)

Aggression Breeds Aggression

The “Zerkalo” (Mirror) newspaper, December 16, 2004

The events described in the article took place in the town of Blagoveschensk, 1100 kilometers east of Moscow, population 33 000, located in Bashkortostan, an autonomous republic within the Russian Federation. This was the first report on what was to become one of the best publicized stories of police brutality in Russia: for three days, local police joined by special police forces had been conducting massive indiscriminate roundups in the town and in neighboring villages. The round up, perhaps better described as police rampage, allegedly was conducted in response to an attack on a group of police officers. According to some reports, more than a thousand people have been detained, beaten, and tortured, dozens hospitalized with serious injuries. Gang rapes by the police of detained girls have been reported.

Six months later, Veronika Shakhova, the editor of the only independent newspaper in Blagoveschensk, who broke the story, was fired from her job.

I think no other town in Bashkortostan, or in the whole of Russia for that matter, has spent the Constitution Day quite like the town of Blagoveschensk. It seems unlikely that the male population of Blagoveschensk planned to spend the holidays with their hands above their heads, like criminals, in the police quarters, while their wives and girlfriend anxiously waited outside. On Monday evening the central streets of the town looked deserted. Young people have moved from streets to yards and into doorways. There are visibly less taxis on the streets. Everybody waits for the things to settle down. The events of the last days have affected, either directly or indirectly, practically every resident of Blagoveschensk. The children have invented a new game, the game of OMON¹: sticks in hands, they chase each other shouting “hands on your head”, “run to the bus”. But many adults have heard those shouts are for real!

Even before the events of last days, many young people had had negative attitude toward men in uniform, but would have been hard pressed to answer why. Now, having experienced the *bespredel*² unleashed by the police on everybody, including underaged, they know the answer.

¹ Special Purpose Police Detachment.

² A recent addition to Russian, literally “a no limits situation or behavior”, meaning, among other things, utter lawlessness and arbitrariness.

Such aggression on the part of the people in masks³ cannot be met with understanding and respect by the young generation.

Boys who in those days spent time in the police quarters learned well that those who are supposed to defend peaceful common folk don't always do that. Why then the forces of law and order have treated residents of our town with such cruelty and sheer arbitrariness? It is not just me who is perplexed: the outraged and embittered residents of Blagoveschensk also want explanations and an apology.

Eyewitnesses

Timur Valiullin, 17, Artur Valiullin, 22

My brother and I were returning home late Friday evening. Around midnight, suddenly some men in fatigues ran up to us and began to beat us up with batons. Then they put us on a bus, and for two hours they drove us around the town, with us watching them rounding up everybody on the way. They were putting on the bus every passerby, dragging people out of fast food places, bars, and shops. In the police basement we were put against the wall with our hands up. Since there was not enough space, they put us in two rows. They were taking people out one by one for fingerprinting and to fill detention reports. Many of those beaten up were made to sign an affidavit that they had not suffered damage to their health.

We spent four hours standing against the wall and have seen some terrible things happening. If one tried to say something about his rights, they would beat him to show him that he has got none. It was two days ago, but still my legs are faltering and I have difficulty walking. That was our Constitution Day greeting from them.

Dmitriy Bobrov, 23

On December 10, 20024, at 3.30 PM, I was on my way to see my girlfriend, minding my own business. When I was passing by the number 11/12 Komarov Street, a man in a uniform beckoned to me, and I was naïve enough to approach him... They put me on a bus and took to the police quarters. They said I was a drug addict, told me to undress to see if I had needle marks. While I was standing by the wall, my raised hands went asleep. I moved them to relieve

³ During an operation, OMON usually wears black masks and carries automatic rifles.

the tension and got hit on the head by a baton, and then they struck my forehead against the wall. I am hazy about what happened next, but there were several of them and they were kicking and beating me. Next day, after I got home, I started to have an increasingly strong headache and kept losing consciousness because of it. My mother and my girlfriend called the ambulance. But in the hospital they just shrugged me away and told me to come back with X-ray of my skull and with blood tests. I am not going to let it be.

Citizen N.

I am not giving my name, and not because I am afraid for myself. These people are capable of anything, and though I don't care about myself anymore, I still got my wife and my child to think about.

Ours is a simple story, just something that apparently was happening then all over Blagoveschensk. I was walking home with my wife and child after an evening with the friends. Near the "Rassvet" shop, we were attacked by an OMON detachment. I was pulled away from them and taken to the police quarters. As the result of my meeting with these guys in masks, I have bruises all over my body and a broken rib.

It is unlikely I will be protesting the violation of my rights and dignity to anybody. I don't think there is anybody out there who can protect us.

Marina, 16, Komarova Street

I am living with my grandmother and my brother. My mother passed away several years ago. We live in those two storey buildings near the hospital.

My brother's friends came to visit him. Then there was a knock on the door and, when I opened it, some armed soldiers in masks stormed in. Before we could say anything, we found ourselves in a KAMAZ bus, with OMON written on it. But we had not been doing anything bad! My brother's friend had just popped in to warm up. Well, they got warmed up, all right, at the police station. I was let go, because a woman working there knew me.

Dinar Gilmanov, 21

On December 10, 2004, I was assaulted on the street by OMON. Everything happened quickly: several blows administered and I had found myself in the police station. They rolled my prints,

kicked me some more and asked to leave. The result: bruised legs' muscles and buttocks, limping.

Vladimir M., 34

On December 11, 2004, at 8.30 PM, we were on our way to the bus stop, the one near the pharmacy. Suddenly, some hulks, in masks, with batons and automatic rifles attacked us. In the police quarters, we stood still against the wall for 5 hours. There was a man standing beside me with one hand in a plaster cast, and he almost got his other hand broken too, by the police. When they were letting people go, the policemen would unleash the dogs saying, "Those of you who are quick enough have a chance to get away". They were confiscating our mobile phones, so we cannot call home. Here I quote them: "Do you know why you are here? To learn respect of the authorities!" This was their argument. This was some 'mask party' they threw for the townsfolk. From now on, our town and the whole district will love wholeheartedly our authorities and our police; will be mighty proud of them. We have been and will remain proud of living as free citizens of a free country. And somebody who is not sure if he is free, he is welcome to pop in the police basement. Just 5 to 6 hours there will remove all doubts.

Anna, an assistant at the "Computerland" Internet café

December 11, 2004 was my shift. At nine something PM, there came in a man in civilian, and, without introducing himself or showing any papers, commanded, "Everybody up against the wall!" The frightened children and I froze. Then there came running in a masked man with a baton. There were three guys in the computer room, about 16 – 18 years old. One of them they pulled from the computer. Another guy they hit on the legs and took away. I was shocked, especially since this was happening in front of 3 - 5 years old children, who were playing there while their parents were in the arcade hall.

The Blagoveschensk residents are still in deep shock from the *BESPREDEL* and *OUTRAGE* that has happened. I would emphasize that it was perpetrated by the law enforcement bodies, by the same people who are supposed to defend OUR RIGHTS, as they are guaranteed by Russian law.

Let me remind you that the events started on the eve of the Constitution Day⁴, when, on December 10, an OMON detachment came to the town, and then, for several days, kept the town in fear, dictating its own rules and ruling the town. Why did they come nobody had bothered to explain.

The district newspaper “Panorama” had not printed a word on what was happening in the town. What they did print was the Constitution Day greetings from the Mayor, who said, I quote: “Dear town residents and villagers! I congratulate you from my heart with the Constitution Day. We celebrate the Constitution of the Russian Federation, which 11 years ago laid the foundation of the contemporary Russia, and has guaranteed the citizens their basic rights and liberties.”

The issue came out on December 11, but the day before, on December 10, those very rights of ordinary Russian citizens guaranteed by the Constitution had been trampled on and destroyed. The town trembled from tramping of OMON boots and swish of their swinging batons. What rights and liberties Mr. Nurtidinov was then talking about? Was he trying to be ironic? Was it possible that he did not know that about 500 innocent people had been arrested the evening before and during the night? That many of those arrested became injured or maimed for life? They have not been charged with anything, just fingerprinted and photographed. With whose knowledge this outrage has been perpetrated? For what sins did OMON beat and humiliate our husbands, brothers, and fathers?

I will never believe that our Mayor, A.A. Nurtidinov, did not know what was going on in his town. Nevertheless, he had the gall to talk about our rights guaranteed by the state. In fact, we have been shown and let understand, once again, that an individual person has no value in the eyes of the local government. Any of us can be, with impunity, humiliated, both physically and morally.

Shame on the town authorities, with whose tacit consent LAWLESSNESS reigned in the town for several days. There is no justification for such actions. Bandits and criminals should not be fought using the same methods they use, cannot be fought by instilling in the law abiding citizens FEAR and HARTRED of authorities.

THE HORROR MOVIE

The following testimonies have not been edited, and are quoted here verbatim for the sake of the truth and the pain they convey.

⁴ December 12.

Sasha, 15, Ruslan, 15

We were taken from the Computerland, on Saturday. Made us stay by the wall all night. It was very scary. When they brought us to the basement we were terrified by the scene: a piece of cloth soaked in blood on the floor, fragments of teeth, knocked out teeth. Just like a horror movie. We were made to sign a paper that we were not harmed by OMON actions.

Igor Matrosov, 16

I was taken in Nizy, near by the post office, on Saturday. I had come for the weekend to stay with my parents. As the result, I stood by the wall until morning. They beat me without leaving marks, but it hurt a lot.

Andrei, 20

Went out to buy cigarettes at the kiosk near my house and ended up in the OMON bus. They warned us, "If somebody's mobile goes off, we will smash it without warning." They did not beat me too bad, but an acquaintance of mine, Sasha was his name, he was beaten half dead.

Tselischev, an Army private

I came home on a five days leave. On Friday evening I went outside for a smoke, and OMON took me just outside the doorway. In the police basement, I was beaten so badly that I now walk on crutches, because an OMON man broke my leg. For a couple of days I could not move: my body was one solid bruise.

Alfit Farvazov

We were having birthday party for our friend, at his place. At two in the morning, the OMON men burst in the apartment and took everybody to the police station. When asked on what grounds they are being taken in, the OMON men would respond by a strike of a baton, saying, "Are these sufficient grounds, or you want more?" While we were still in the apartment, a 6

years old boy ran up to his father, but an OMON man threw him into the wall, so that the boy started bleeding in the nose.

At the police station we were told, “The town is under curfew, and there should be nobody on the street after 11 PM, and no lights in the apartments.” Though there had been no official announcements about it.

I was held at the police until morning, and then was taken to the hospital with multiple bruises. I still cannot move. Everything is bruised: legs, back, buttocks, arms. My knees are swollen. In a word, I am a sight.

Radik, 16, Ilvir, 17

We were taken on the Apteka, on Friday. They beat us and made to stay against the wall all night. The OMON bullied us: they would spray tear gas into the bus full of people, and then step out of the bus and laugh at us.

When they were letting us go, they made us sign a paper that their actions had caused no harm to our health. Those who would not sign they beat until they agree.

Edik, 15, Kostya, 15

For us it became a game. We were getting a thrill from trying to run past the OMON without getting caught. By Sunday, we decided to let them catch us, and our dream came true. But, unlike the others, we did not get beaten.

A. A. Yeremyan, the village of Ilyiana Polyana

I and my girlfriend went on Friday to a disco. About midnight the OMON arrived, marched all guys out of the disco and into a bus. On the way, they gave us some cuffs on the nape with their batons. They took all 52 of us to the Blagoveschensk District Police Station. We spent 5 hours in the basement, against the wall, while they were filling forms, fingerprinting us, photographing, making us get down on the knees and shout, “I love the police”. All that time we would get beaten for as much as moving a finger.

I saw one guy collapse with epileptic seizures, and I ran to him and gave him first aid, and received some extra blows for that.

At five in the morning they let me go. I was barely able to walk, since my legs were all bruised, but my village was 20 kilometers away. Nothing for it, I caught a taxi.

On Monday went to the hospital.

Andrei, 30

My wife and I took our child for a walk. And then, when we were passing the “Pharaoh” bar, the OMON men had appeared. One of them ran up to me and pulled the child out of my hands, while the other one was beating me with the rifle butt. They gave the child to my wife and took me to the police. 5 hours later I barely made my way home: the legs were all bruised.

What is this *bespredel* in the town?

Nobody told us the town is under martial law!

How could the Mayor let these disturbances happening in the town? Don't we have no rights anymore?

Maks E.

The OMON picked me up at the “Credo” bar, on Friday. They beat me up. For three and a half hours I stood still in the same pose by the wall. At 2 AM they let me go.

The OMON jokes are idiotic. One of them thought he had smelled tobacco smoke in the bus, and he goes, “Get out of the bus! The last ten will have to crawl out!” This started a regular riot: people were running over each other to get out first.

Vitaliy, 19

On Saturday, at 4 in the morning, I was coming home from a date and was picked up by OMON near the “Cruise” shop. They beat me on the legs and on the neck. I was let go at 8 in the morning.

Oskolkov, Tukhvatshin, the village of Ilyiana Polyana

On Friday, we were standing by the house, smoking. All of a sudden OMON swooped on us and took us in. We were taken to Blagoveschensk. They beat us on the legs and buttocks if we moved even slightly. In about 5 hours they let us go. We had to walk back to the village, at 5 in the morning. We barely made it.

Sergey Yavaev, 17

On Friday, at 9.30, on my way home, I was picked up by OMON just 20 meters from my doorway. They did not beat me too bad, but bad enough, without leaving bruises.

Misha, 11

I was coming home from the “Computerland”, at 9 in the evening, and suddenly I ran into OMON. The masked man with automatic rifles as if sprang out of the ground. I got very scared. They took me to the police and hit me a couple of times. While I was there, I heard girls screaming, “Stop torturing us, don’t beat us”.

I was very scared. In 3 hours they let me go. My mother almost had a heart attack, because she saw me captured and taken away, through the window, and she thought it was terrorists.

Potapov

At the police quarters, the OMON men took my mobile phone, Samsung D100, and did not give it back. But it has not been paid up yet, and it costs 7400 rubles.

Anna, 47

My son was taken when he stopped his car by a shop. There were three of them, and they dragged him out of the car and drove to a police station. There he was beaten and kicked. When he lost consciousness, they dragged him out, undressed him, and poured cold water over him until he came to. Then they called an ambulance and it took him home.

When I saw him, I almost fainted. He could not walk. We immediately took him to the hospital. There, the doctor told us to make him rest. But my son is due to be drafted in a week.

I am outraged with disturbances in the town? What the town administration is thinking about?

What is this, Chechnya?

The authorities should answer to us, the mothers.

They have proved their helplessness by bringing in OMON from Ufa⁵. What we, the taxpayers, are paying them for? To bully us and our children?

⁵ Ufa – the capital of Bashkortostan.

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